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Press Briefing by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

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SECRETARY RICE: Dobryi dyen. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm here principally to take your questions, but let me just begin by saying that after very fruitful discussions with President Putin yesterday, and with Prime Minister Prodi of Italy, the President resumed his bilateral schedule this morning with very constructive talks with Prime Minister Blair and with President Chirac of France. Those talks centered, of course, on a wide variety of issues, but as you might imagine, there were extensive discussions about the ongoing and unfolding situation in the Middle East.

I think it's fair to say that the President and President Chirac, the President and Prime Minister Blair see the situation similarly; they, of course, all very concerned about the ongoing violence there, and particularly the cost to civilians -- Israeli civilians, Palestinian civilians, and of course, Lebanese civilians. They are all working together and discussing how we might chart a way forward, because, after all, the real goal here is, of course, to bring an end to the violence, but to bring an end to the violence in a way that is going to be sustainable.

The Middle East has been subject to these violent episodes for a very long time, and yet there is an international framework that would give us a political way forward. In the case of Lebanon, that framework is Resolution 1559, which talks about the importance of the sovereignty of Lebanon, the importance of making certain that unauthorized armed groups cannot do what Hezbollah, in fact, did, which was to launch the attacks against Israel when the Lebanese government did not even know. In the case of the Palestinian Territories, there is a framework forward called the road map. But, of course, we've been doing a lot of work toward a two-state solution after the disengagement of Israel from Gaza.

So there are a lot of international agreements and framework -- and a framework out there for the resolution of these crises in a way that would be sustainable, so that when the violence ends, it ends. And then we are able to move forward to a two-state solution, in the case of the Palestinian Territories and Israel, and a sovereign and democratic Lebanese government in the case of Lebanon.

Let me, then, take your questions. Terry.

Q Iran said today that the incentives package that was presented is an acceptable basis for negotiations, and they suggested the G8 has two options, a path of logic, and a path of extremism. What is your reaction to Iran's statement?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Terry, I've only just seen the statement, and it comes from a foreign ministry official. Obviously, the G8 is not the negotiating -- potential negotiating partner here. It is the Group of Six that had the meeting in Paris just recently.

There is, indeed, a very good proposal on the table that could be a basis for negotiations. There is also a path ahead to the Security Council on which we are now launched, given the outcome of the meeting in Paris, because the Iranians had not responded positively in a timely fashion. If the Iranians want to respond positively, I would hope that they would do so through the channel that is established between the six and the government of Iran, and that is Mr. Solana. His interlocutor has been Mr. Larijani, but I would hope that someone would get in touch with Mr. Solana with a concrete and authoritative answer.

But I've only just recently seen the statement. Obviously, there is a path of negotiation. It's a good proposal; it could be a basis. We also have the other path on which we're currently launched if we can't come to agreement that that's the right basis.

Q In your conversations with Prime Minister Olmert, did you suggest, in describing a need for restraint, a tipping point at which civilian casualties or damage done in Lebanon would no longer be acceptable to the United States?

SECRETARY RICE: We're saying to the Israelis privately precisely what we're saying to them publicly. Of course, we have more extensive talks, but the message is the same, which is that we understand that -- and believe strongly that every state has a right to defend its sovereignty, every state has a right to defend its people from terrorist attacks and to take actions to prevent those attacks.

In the current circumstances, there is a strategic picture to keep in mind, because the ultimate security and safety of Israelis and Palestinians, Israelis and Lebanese, is going to come from the political framework that has been established by the international community; 1559 in the case of Lebanon, and the road map in the case of the Palestinian Territories.

We have said to Prime Minister Olmert and to other Israelis that we are deeply concerned about the effect on innocent civilians, and would hope that Israel would be mindful of, and restrained in, its operations so that the innocent civilians do not suffer -- innocent civilian casualties, civilian infrastructure -- and so that the Lebanese government, which is a good and democratic and, in fact, young democratic government, is not undermined by those actions. But that has been the message to the Israelis, just as we've been saying publicly, and I think as the President said yesterday.

Q There is no line, though, at which you would withdraw your support?

SECRETARY RICE: I think it's not useful to speculate about something that is -- would, indeed, be hypothetical, but rather to continue to ask all parties to act responsibly, and really to recognize that until we address the conditions that began this, which is that extremists launched attacks, had been launching -- we forget, there had been missile attacks that had been launched for an extended period of time. We also forget

that we -- we should not forget that this took place despite -- perhaps, because of -- positive political developments that were taking place, particularly in the Palestinian Territories where President Abbas was engaging with elements of the elected government to try and move the entire Palestinian government toward the Quartet conditions so that you could get back onto the road map.

That is really the appropriate course. But, obviously, extremists in Hamas, Hezbollah, and their supporters in Syria and Iran do not want to see a resolution of these situations on the basis of 1559 and the road map, because then they would have no reason for violence.

Yes.

Q You say that the leaders here are working together on coming together on a common position. How do you square that with President Putin's comments last night about Israel pursuing wider goals, and also President Chirac's comments about Israel using excessive force? There doesn't seem to be much of a common position.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let me just -- you can cite specific statements by people, or you can look at, for instance, the meeting that President Chirac and President Bush had this morning where President Chirac said in no uncertain terms that the United States and France see similarly what needs to be done here.

There is a great concern on all sides about civilian casualties. There is a great concern about damage to civilian infrastructure. I don't think that there is anyone here who would say that Israel does not have a right to defend itself. And I think that everyone here would note that the extremists who are attacking not just Israel, but the very foundation for peace need to be stopped. After all, the United States and France are cosponsors of Resolution -- were cosponsors with Great Britain of Resolution 1559. Russia is a member of the Quartet, which is a sponsor of the road map.

And so you can pick out a comment here or a comment there, but I would ask you to look at the strategic agreement between all of the parties here that the current situation is only going to be resolved by getting back on the road map, only going to be resolved by Resolution 1559, and that the largest impediment to that is those parties that are outside of that framework.

The Lebanese government of President Siniora is not outside of the framework of Resolution 1559. Hezbollah, apparently, believes that it is. And on the road map, President Abbas is clearly committed to it; Israel is clearly committed to it. But you do have extremist elements in Hamas, and perhaps all of Hamas -- we haven't heard from Hamas -- that do not want the road map to succeed, and don't recognize the very basis of it, which is the existence of two states.

Yes.

Q Is Israel currently showing restraint? Or would restraint be a change in behavior?

SECRETARY RICE: The Israelis are trying to defend themselves, but we continue to remind Israel that any operations that it undertakes will have consequences in addition to anything that they can do to improve their own security situation. And so the Israelis themselves have said that they want to spare innocent civilian life; they themselves have said that they are mindful of problems of civilian infrastructure -- they've said this to me -- and of the humanitarian situation.

And so I don't think that there is a quarrel here. I'm not going to try to judge each and every Israeli operation

or each and every Israeli attack. But we are going to keep this framework in place with Israel, because, while we concentrate on trying to deal with the immediate consequences, what we really need to do is to concentrate on a way forward that is going to permit the cessation of violence to, first of all, be sustainable -- that means that we won't be back here three weeks from now talking about trying to get another cessation of violence -- and that means getting back on a political path in each of these distinct crises.

Q Why not call for a cease-fire until you can get back on that political path?

SECRETARY RICE: We want a sustainable cessation of violence. I --

Q -- you want the violence to end?

SECRETARY RICE: I can tell you that -- of course, we want violence to end. But I can tell you right now if violence ends on the basis of somehow Hezbollah or Hamas continuing to hold in their hands the capabilities anytime they wish to start launching rockets again into Israel, if violence ends on the basis of no change in the underlying political support for Resolution 1559 or for the work that President Abbas is doing, if violence ends on the basis of Syria and Iran being able to turn on the key again anytime, we will have achieved very, very little, indeed, and we will be right back here, perhaps in a worse circumstance because the terrorists will assume that nobody is willing to take on what has been a very clear assault now on the progress that is being made by moderate forces in the Middle East.

We're working also with the Arab states, with the Egyptians, with the Saudis, with the Jordanians, and of course, there's going to be a U.N. mission out there on behalf of Secretary General Annan -- I've talked to him several times. We have a number of diplomatic venues in which to pursue this. But we also need a program to pursue, and that program has got to address the underlying circumstances that caused this situation.

Q With regard to North Korea, how satisfied are you with the U.N. Security Council resolution without Chapter 7, which Japan strongly desired? And also, given the fact that the North Koreans rejected this immediately, how effective do you think this will be?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I am, -- frankly, I find it remarkable, the resolution that was passed unanimously in the Security Council. Let me just note first that it has been since 1993 since there has been a resolution on North Korea, and here we have an affirmative Chinese vote -- not an abstention, an affirmative Chinese vote -- on a resolution that demands that North Korea cease its activities that are jeopardizing international peace and security, that demands that North Korea find a way back to the negotiating table, that requires member states to work to prevent the North Koreans from receiving materials that might enhance their capabilities. It's a remarkable resolution. And with an affirmative Chinese vote.

I just want to say to China that the responsibility that has been shown here -- and I think the President will say this to President Hu later -- really shows that the efforts that we've been making over the last couple of years to have six-party talks -- not U.S.-North Korea talks, where it was the United States and North Korea -- but six-party talks, in which all of North Korea's neighbors have been working toward a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, that that's really paying off, because we really now have a coalition. And that is really the answer to your second question. That's why I think ultimately North Korea will have no choice but to return to the talks and pursue denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Q You said that you want to get back on the diplomatic track, but is there any sense whatsoever that, given the effectiveness of the early attacks by Israel, that Hezbollah might, in fact, be rendered obsolete militarily? Is

that on the table? And also, on a related point, some foreign governments have already started trying to get their people out of Lebanon. Is the U.S. government, other than the travel warnings that have been issued, is the U.S. government contemplating anything like that?

SECRETARY RICE: On the last point, Dick, we're assessing the situation practically hour-by-hour, in terms of our own people. We obviously have plans and contingency plans should we need to bring people out. I get reports on this every couple of hours as to how this is going. But our Ambassador who is on the ground will obviously do what we need to to protect Americans.

As to the basis for diplomatic action, obviously the most important issue is that we do have to find a way to isolate and disable extremists who are trying to frustrate the aspirations of moderate forces in the region, and the democratic aspirations of moderate forces in the region. They're also, by the way, not just trying to frustrate the aspirations of democratic forces, they're trying to destabilize the region at the same time.

Now, the Israelis are, I think, trying to defend themselves. It's obvious that when you have rockets being fired into your territory, I believe eight or nine people killed today in Haifa, that there is a responsibility of Israelis to defend their people. I don't think you can ask any less of any state.

But the broader context here is that moderate forces have to draw together, with the support of the international community, through international vehicles that are already available to us -- 1559 in Lebanon, the road map and the work that Mahmoud Abbas has been doing in the Palestinian Territories -- in order to lay a foundation where these extremists cannot do what they're trying to do.

And so this is a time of -- obviously, it's a complex time, it's a worrying time, it's a time of great concern about the toll on civilians. It is also a time when we have an opportunity to lay a foundation for a cessation of violence that this time will be a permanent cessation of violence, which would then allow us to really make a permanent peace.

Q Is there any role for the United States other than diplomacy?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think the United States' role is a diplomatic role. It's also a role to support our friends and allies in the region who are going -- who are now living under extremely difficult circumstances. So, for instance, the Siniora government -- which is a friend of the United States, and which I've been in touch with the Prime Minister, the President has been in touch with the Prime Minister; of course, we are talking to the Israelis; we are also talking to the Egyptians and the Saudis and to others -- so, in part, the United States needs to make clear that we're going to adhere to principle, we're going to stand strong with those who are moderate forces and who want this to come out the right way, and, of course, we are going to throw the full diplomatic influence and weight of the United States behind these efforts.

We are -- I've talked to Javier Solana, who I know will probably go to the region, and we are -- I've also been in constant contact with Kofi Annan, because we hope we can support this U.N. mission.

But, principally, this is really a time for diplomacy, but it's not just diplomacy of talking and talking and talking. It's diplomacy of moving toward a goal of using the diplomatic vehicles -- in fact, in the case of the road map, the international vehicle; in the case of the 1559, the Security Council vehicle -- that we have established over the last couple of years, and using that now. This is the time to use those vehicles to get results, because those vehicles are going to give us the best outcome for a permanent peace.

Yes, Steve?

Q You said that North Korea will have no choice but to rejoin the talks. They're already rejecting the resolution. What are you going to do now? Are the Chinese going to talk to them? What's the next step here?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Steve, I think it's fair to say I'm not surprised that the first reaction of the North Koreans is to reject the Security Council resolution. They tend to be rejectionist and pretty isolated in any case. My point is that if they want a different way ahead, if they don't want to be even more isolated than they are, if they do not want to face some of the additional pressures that can be brought to bear on them, then I think that they will eventually realize that they've got to come back to the six-party talks. That's really the only game in town.

And when we are in the six-party talks, we're able to engage North Koreans. That's not a problem. Chris Hill has done that on a number of accessions. But the six-party talks are the vehicle now that the international community is using to deal with North Korea, and I think eventually North Korea is going to recognize that.

Yes.

Q When you talk about consequences with Israel, how do you define those consequences? And are there consequences for U.S. Mideast policy if civilian casualties mount, this back-and-forth continues and the U.S. is seen as standing with Israel?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're standing with all responsible parties in the region and with moderate parties in the region who want a Middle East that is different than the 30-plus years of -- really, 60-plus years of Middle East history.

And I want to say just a word about this notion that somehow this all arose in the last couple of years, because we've been calling for democracy and things have gotten stirred up in the Middle East. There was a false stability in the Middle East over the last several years that produced a set of circumstances and an atmosphere so malignant that you had the rise of extremist forces like al Qaeda. So the notion that somehow the Middle East -- which has, of course, been a violent place now for any -- for a lot of years -- that the Middle East was somehow undisturbed, and because now we are fighting extremism, because now we are pressing for a democratic voice for the people of the Middle East, that somehow that has now caused the current crisis I think is grotesque.

What you had in the Middle East before was American policies -- bipartisan, by the way, it had been pursued by Democratic Presidents and by Republican Presidents -- that engaged in so-called Middle East exceptionalism and was pursuing stability at the expense of democracy, and it turned out, as we learned on 9/11 or July 7th here, or in any -- in London or across the world, was getting neither.

And so we have a new day in the Middle East, and it is a day in which the people of the Middle East, the people of Lebanon without Syrian forces there, the people of the Palestinian Territories with a democratic leader in Mahmoud Abbas, are seeking to find a democratic future, and on that basis, to build a framework and a firm foundation for peace -- a two-state solution in the Palestinian Territories, and an independent, sovereign Lebanon as a result of 1559.

And so, yes, it's turbulent, and, yes, we are deeply concerned about mounting civilian casualties. But we need to also recognize that the only way that we're going to deal with the underlying problem in the Middle East is

to deal with the extremists, isolate the extremists, and put in place moderate democratic states.

Yes.

Q If I may, has dissatisfaction in the region with progress in Iraq affected U.S. leverage in this crisis at all?

SECRETARY RICE: No. In fact, we have very good relations with all of the states of the region -- the responsible states of the region. But let's remember that Iraq is a piece of the puzzle of a different kind of Middle East. Can you really imagine a different kind of Middle East with Saddam Hussein sitting in the middle of it? Of course not. That's why we went to war in 1991, because he had a vision of a different kind of Middle East. It was one in which Iraq dominated its neighbors. And so Iraq is a piece of this different kind of Middle East.

And it will be difficult, but we are at an important juncture right now, because extremists have showed their hand. They showed their hand as being fundamentally opposed to the democratic aspirations and to efforts to bring peace between Israel and its neighbors and efforts to have a democratic and sovereign Lebanon. That's what's really happened here. And they've showed that their sponsors are in Tehran and in Damascus. Things are clarified now. We know where the lines are drawn. And we now have to respond in a way that strengthens and emboldens in a more permanent way the more moderate forces in this region.

I think I can take one more.

Q Is there a specific infrastructure site in Lebanon, a bridge, a power plant, a road, that the U.S. has asked Israel not to target? And does the U.S. believe Israel has hit any infrastructure target wrongly at this point, that it wasn't a legitimate military target, they shouldn't have done it?

SECRETARY RICE: As I said, I am not going to try to judge step-by-step, target-by-target, Israeli military operations. We are continuing to press the case that restraint is necessary in the cause of self-defense, in this case, because as Israel defends itself, and we fully respect Israel's right to defend itself, it also needs to look ahead to the partners that it is trying to build, the moderate partners.

President Abbas is a moderate partner in the Palestinian Territories. Prime Minister Siniora is a moderate partner in Lebanon. In the case of President Abbas, Prime Minister Olmert was reaching out to President Abbas, as President Abbas was trying to bring the Palestinian political leadership toward the Quartet conditions. The Israelis and the Palestinians were talking to each other and reaching out. That's what the extremists want to stop.

And so, yes, we are urging the Israelis to be restrained; we're talking to them about these things. We're talking about the need to minimize the effect on civilians. We're continuing to talk about alleviating humanitarian problems in the Palestinian Territories in any way that we can. But we are also cognizant of the fact that the Israelis, moderate Palestinians, the Lebanese, and Arab states like Jordan and Egypt and Saudi Arabia have a common goal here, which is a Middle East that has a framework for a stable peace. And that is what we are trying to work toward.

I guess I'm done. (Laughter.) Great. Thank you very much.

END 12:50 P.M. (Local)